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Towards a Sustainable Survival of Cultural Landscape

Vol I



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Guardianes Del Riachuelo – The Search of New Landscape for an Urban River

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Fundación Ciudad - Argentina

Abstract

Guardianes del Riachuelo is a local community initiative established to help recover landscape features of the river banks of the most polluted urban river in the country, the Riachuelo, in Buenos Aires, capital city of Argentina. From the city's foundation by the Spaniards, the river banks of the Riachuelo offered shelter for migrants from overseas, and over the centuries turned into a lively cultural and artistic area of Buenos Aires and into a vigorous economic center in the region. Despite its rich background and Buenos Aires's strong link with its Río de la Plata (River of Silver), Buenos Aires disregarded the potential of this territory and today it suffers from social, economic and environmental decay. The Riachuelo margins and surrounding neighborhoods became the *backyard* of Buenos Aires. In early 2000, a series of public meetings managed to encourage citizens to regain the flavour and liveliness of the old days, "to bring the Riachuelo back to our lives". An active network of neighbors - the *Guardianes* (the Guardians) - envisioned themselves as a means to foster capacity building and local leadership, develop skills and take actions to prove that the river is alive, and that the city can learn to live with it again. With an alliance of public sector, private sector and civil society, the *Guardianes* started a program in Villa 21/24, an old and extended riverside slum. Through a participatory process the villa dwellers defined priorities and strategies that started with a clean up of river banks and nearby blocks of land. A set of related activities followed which impacted on habitat, landscape, and health conditions. The improvements in community life show positive responses and results towards a new landscape for the Riachuelo, with a strong willingness to expand and to replicate the model.

Keywords: Collaborative Model-Sustainability-Landscape Recovery-Quality of Life.

1 Objective

Managed by argentine NGO Fundación Ciudad, *Guardianes del Riachuelo* is a community based program, whose objective is to design and develop local actions that help recuperate and enhance the banks of an urban, highly polluted densely populated Riachuelo River, and recover it for community use and enjoyment.

2 Background

Fundación Ciudad is a non partisan, non-governmental organization (NGO) that has contributed over 15 years to improve the relationship between Buenos Aires and the Río de la Plata, one of its most significant natural features.

With *civic participation* as a key instrument, Fundación Ciudad organized a series of public forums to make real contributions to public policy. At the "Sustainable Use for the Metropolitan Waterfront" Public Forum (2001), neighbors of Buenos Aires claimed the waterfront as a public space with a mix of uses. Given the demand for recreational options for the population, the riverfront, participants claimed, should become an unquestionable green space where landscape, conservation, environmental quality are essential elements for a modern metropolis. In that opportunity, Architect and Landscape Planner Diana Balmori suggested for Buenos Aires a green corridor, 100 km long, from the Delta of the Paraná River to Berisso in the south, encompassing the entire metropolitan region waterfront, including the mouth of the Riachuelo. This "river park", just as Central Park did in New York in the XIX century, set a paradigm for a city of the XXI century. Fundación Ciudad became a promoter of this concept.

The "Sustainable Development of the Matanza - Riachuelo River Basin" forum (2004) followed, and it focused on the most complex tributary system of the Río de la Plata: the Matanza- Riachuelo. This time conversations convened over 700 active, committed neighbors, experts and decision makers who, based on well researched information, participated of a series of public meetings and local workshops. Consensus included a strong claim to decision makers on clean up and sustainable development of the basin as a whole. Including land use plans, expansion of fresh water and sewage, control over sources of pollution systems the clean up of borders, forestation and greening of adjacent spaces. Community acknowledged that until that could happen, community initiatives at local levels could start right away. The most popular one was submitted by NGO Metrópolis al Sur: "*Guardianes de los Arroyos*" (*Guardians of the Streams*).

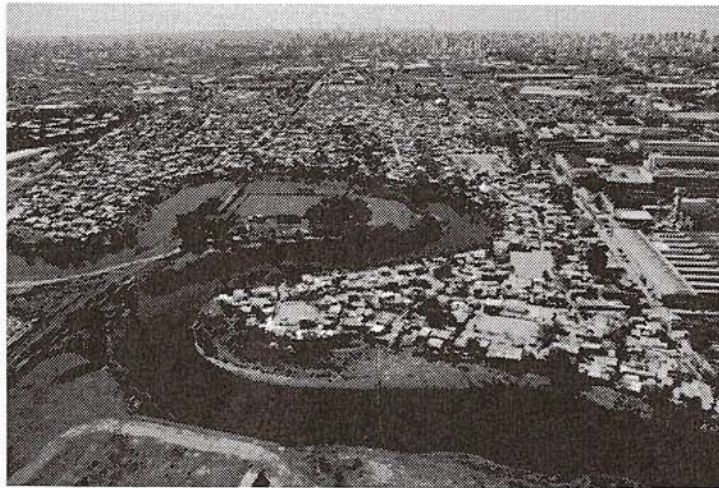


Figure 1. Meandro de Brian - Riachuelo River, Villa 21-24 - Buenos Aires

3 Riachuelo - Nature and History

Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina was founded by the Spaniards in 1536 on the banks of Riachuelo, a tributary to the *Río de la Plata*. It was believed to be the gateway to a land of endless resources of gold and silver. Today 12.000.000 *porteños* (people from the port) live in the fertile plains of the Argentine pampas, with a mild climate, a mosaic of nationalities and a long tradition of agro activities and industry.

The Riachuelo river, the lower section of 64km long Matanza-Riachuelo basin, served as an excellent natural port and evolved into a commercial, manufacturing and warehouse district (*barracas*) for beef, leather, wool and sometimes, slaves. With a strong productive profile, a transportation and connection hub as well as the most important industrial region in the country it also became the source of endless claims for water pollution, odors, filthiness and lack of controls; over the decades, the whole territory got a distinct stigma of the largest environmental problem in Argentina. With the development of new ports and several economic crises, the intensive use for Riachuelo started to diminish. Rather than a cohesive regional center and a landscape opportunity, the river became more of an interruptive feature. A *natural boundary* between the Federal District and the Province of Buenos Aires, the backyard of a city where lack of political decision in addition to confusing superposition of jurisdictions, legislation and institutions make planning and management extremely difficult, slow and inefficient.

The capital city of Argentina lies on the left bank of Riachuelo. La Boca, Barracas and Pompeya, are traditional southern neighborhoods developed along the two large natural, vast, winding meanders of Riachuelo: *Vuelta de Rocha* and *Meandro de Brian*. These typical Riachuelo neighborhoods share the spirit of Spanish and Italian influences and offer a mixture of residential, commercial and industrial uses (food, textiles, metal and chemical) that make the area distinctive

in Buenos Aires. Originally occupied by upper class from Buenos Aires, these neighborhoods evolved for the last century close to railroad and port infrastructure and surrounded by a unique set of buildings and historic sites that served as inspiration for a lively cultural life of design, art and music. Bridges, the old *Transbordador*, shipyards, railroad stations and yards, warehouses, power plants, churches, markets, workshops, hospital buildings, private residences complete a suggestive urban scenario. Most of this rich architectural heritage lacks inventorying and frequent misuse or abandonment leads illegal occupation, poor maintenance or demolition. The occupation of an old railroad yard, sprawled along the river and inland in the left bank of *Meandro de Brian*, in *Barracas* neighbourhood and turned into the largest slum, Villa 21-24.

Social and habitat conditions have worsened. Low middle class population struggle for free spaces and choose to settle in the low lands of the river, on the very borders of the water with minimum infrastructure, precarious homes, and poor public services.

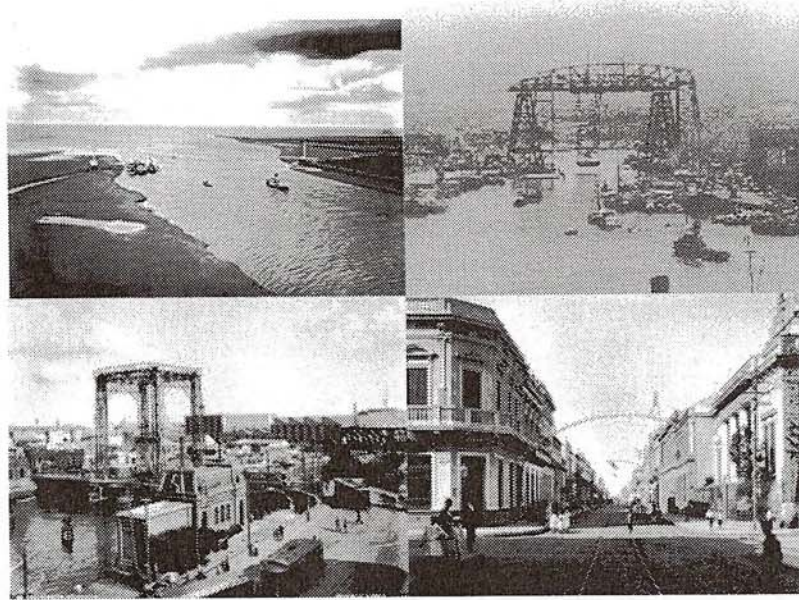


Figure 2 – Riachuelo, old days

4 The Method

4.1 Public Issues Forums

With *Public Issues Forums for a Sustainable City* Fundación Ciudad started a new approach to the construction of an innovative urban agenda for urban public policy. A decision making model based on deliberation increases the capacity of citizens to make choices about how to deal with their problems. Active, participatory and interdisciplinary work encourages a community to frame issues and make decisions together.

The concept of *Guardianes* (Guardians) is an outcome of these public conversations. Rooted on the frustrations and ineffectiveness of government in dealing with tough issues, neighbors of the Riachuelo basin, strongly attached to tradition and identity for generations, concluded that a self planned and managed strategy could induce change, in a faster and more efficient manner to help regain control of public spaces along an urban stream. What started as a concept, developed into a program that relays on the fact that communities cannot delegate some responsibility to government officials only.

4.2 The Collaborative Model

Guardianes del Riachuelo is a chapter of the proposal *Guardianes de los Arroyos* presented at the Public Forums. It was conceived by *Metrópolis al Sur* on the basis of "collaborative model" (2002) as implemented in similar urban contexts in Latin America. This approach aims at bringing together articulated actions, a synergy among neighbors, private business, civil organizations, local and provincial authorities where environmental and general quality of life and habitat conditions have true possibilities of improving over a short period of time.

5 The Problem

For the last century, non planned occupation of land and urbanization became a vicious circle that has modified the natural landscape and worsened habitat conditions of the middle and lower sections of the Matanza Riachuelo River. Municipalities such as La Matanza, Lanús, Lomas de Zamora as well as the Buenos Aires capital city's left bank, are particularly affected.

As a typical river of the Argentine plains, Riachuelo has a very slight gradient, scarce volume of running water and limited self purification capacity. Sources of constant and uncontrolled pollution of water and soil come from discharges from around 3000 industries, untreated sewage loads in both margins and open air garbage dumps. Water is not considered fit for consumption, leisure activities and development of natural life. The low lands of both river banks, once green and refreshing for public use, are now neglected in public urban policies. Lack of political decision and control and leave patches of unattended open space.

Low and middle class population, many from overseas, seeking for cheap land, started an uninterrupted occupation process of some Riachuelo's neighborhoods, especially those located close to urban commercial and residential centers.

Villa 21-24, is one of the many slums of the city of Buenos Aires. Located on the Meandro de Brian, in the neighborhood of Barracas, this slum encompasses over 40,000 people who in many cases have invaded the very borders of the river banks. Families live in improvised, small shelters, surrounded by the constant risk of flooding, a large number of open air garbage dumps of domestic and

industrial waste. Serious health risks impact on dwellers with limited access to public services: fresh water, sewage, electricity and garbage collection system.

They compete for land, for housing and for jobs; most of them work as painters, electricians, construction workers, carpenters. Women stay home or work as domestic service for downtown residences and offices. Education hardly reaches high school level. *Cartoneo* (informal street garbage collectors) for survival is a common practice. Illegal garbage dumping is often organized and protected by local dwellers and authorities and becomes a source of income and sometimes food. The lack of government garbage collection was *the critical problem* identified by this neighbourhood and the starting point for a program geared to change the declining habitat conditions of the river.

Historically perceived a source of social and environmental problems, neglect and inefficiency has always attempted against recent plans to provide permanent solutions to the basin. In 2006 the National Supreme Court conveyed City and Provincial authorities to submit a clean up plan to progressively eliminate pollutants and discharges into the basin and design proper land use plans. A national law created *ACUMAR* (Autoridad de Cuenca Matanza Riachuelo – Matanza Riachuelo Authority), a public inter jurisdictional body with specific attributions on planning and management of the basin. Objectives include the improvement of quality of life; environment recovery and prevention of further damages.

In the same year, 2006, Riachuelo neighborhoods were declared in state of emergency by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires and currently are part of some recent city government plans and actions: definition of future uses and the removal of illegal constructions, among the first ones; a clean up campaign of river banks among the latter.

However, normal garbage collection services in villas in general and in Villa 21-24 in particular, is limited or nonexistent. Due to both technical and safety reasons, trucks, cleaning and sweeping services as provided for the rest of the city, never reach the borders of the Riachuelo; operations avoid inner streets and alleys and choose to provide daily perimetric services only.

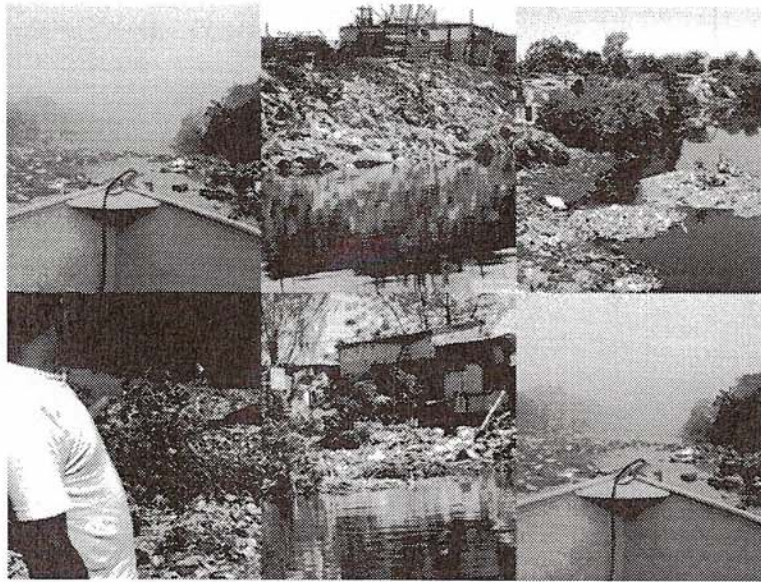


Figure 2. Riachuelo –The problem

5.1 The Basin in Different Views

Buenos Aires Urban Environmental Plan is the official instrument that provides guidelines for the construction of the city. It clearly defines the need to recover the public, free-of-charge use of riverfronts of the Río de la Plata and Riachuelo. Fundación Ciudad has consistently supported the idea of a continuous, green corridor along rivers of Buenos Aires, which promote connectivity of fragmented and scattered landscapes and infrastructures and has proven a safe and attractive alternative of public spaces around the world.

Many *porteños* prefer to ignore the existence of a Riachuelo in urban life. Or prefer to limit it for touristic purposes, such as tango lovers, and photography fans. For those who have enjoyed part of its history, the river is a source of endless memories, identity, life, and work.

Focus groups conducted along 2006 (Fundación Ciudad 2006) provided insight of how problems were perceived and valued by local dwellers. Leticia Funes, owner of the Community Kitchen, Juan, assistant to the Parrish, Miguel Leiva and Ángel Mencia, and neighbors of the villa, gave some accurate insights.

“It is true: the river gives you bugs, allergies, odor and pollution” Miguel instead, remembers the days “when clearer waters used to flow in front of his modest house”.

Leticia runs a community kitchen for unprivileged children. She remembers the days “when systematic controls of water quality were performed by the government and by other technical institutes. Not any more now....”

She also explains how she and her husband had to remove stones, and mud to clean up a piece of the river border to grow vegetables for her kitchen. The only

orchard in the area, she used to receive official support and controls for whatever she grew and consumed at the kitchen. Not any more...“It would be interesting to teach others to produce and consume”.

Miguel and Ángel insist that the villa neighbors have an acceptable level of relationship: Meetings, camps, celebrations led mainly by the local Parrish helped bring together men, women and children. Today we all “talk to each other, even if we live apart in the villa”. They perceive that it is a good moment to try a step further. Ángel envisions “a river border with trees, and grass”. Juan adds that “trees in the perimeter of the soccer field would make it friendlier for players and friends. I enjoy when I breathe”. Leticia closes by saying that good things have a contagious effect: “when people see a well kept grass, an orchard, flowers....”

Various neighbors expressed (Fundación Ciudad, 2006) “I dream of green spaces where to play with my children”; “I would like to be able to talk with my neighbors about the problems that affect us all”; “I want to see a green soccer field”; “I enjoy watching the birds and sipping mate on Saturday afternoons”.

6 Design of the Program

An agreement between Fundación Ciudad and the Ministry of Public Space and Environment of the City of Buenos Aires started the path to the design, implementation and coordination of a community program under the name of “Guardianes del Riachuelo”.

Villa 21-24, a community eager and open to test a collaborative model, a hands-on practical program oriented to change the status of the neighborhood's river borders and overall slum, was chosen as the test site.

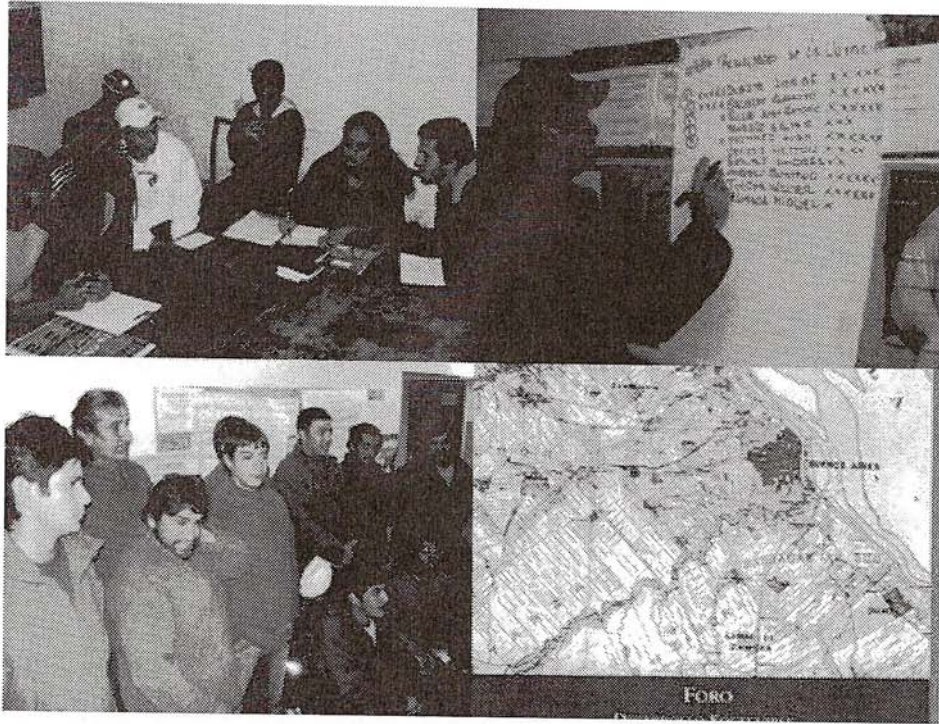


Figure 3. *Guardianes* work with slum neighbors

Key grass root organizations such as the community parish (Parroquia Nuestra Señora de Caacupé), community kitchen (Comedor Amor y Paz) and the local Municipal Health Care Unit, all closely linked to the life in the border of the Riachuelo, provided the key support from the very beginning. Additionally, NGOs, religious and educational communities, other municipal health centers, local leaders and organizations were invited to join. The private sector, through the company that provides garbage collection services in this sector of the city, Urbasur, showed great interest in this initiative and joined the team from the very start.



Figure 4. Guardianes "in action"

During the first stage, Fundación Ciudad and Metrópolis al Sur, conducted a long and intense participatory diagnosis process together with neighbors in order to identify: problems, choices, risk areas, prospective alliances, a vision of the future of the selected site and strategies of work.

Surveys and focus groups contributed to verify and cross check findings. The number of issues were too many and too different. But neighbors agreed that garbage management was *problem number one*. Around 95% of the interviewed neighbors, concluded that it was garbage had an impact on health and it was what contributed so badly to the poor perception of Riachuelo by the city's population. Although 61% confirmed that they use street containers for final disposal, a 23% admitted to use the river as the disposal place for most to of their daily waste. Others just burn or bury it. Some 60% of the neighbors expressed their interest in an alternative garbage collection system and 48% specified that, for efficient work, the system should be run by the neighbors themselves. Once the profile of an ideal *Guardián* was defined, the team, ready for action was convened under the Parish's support.

6.1' Design of an Alternative Garbage Collection System

The first test was performed on a strip of land right on the river bank: it encompassed about 350 families served on a daily basis by a team of 4 *Guardianes*, who would pick up perishable and non-perishable household garbage.

Urbasur, the private company responsible for the provision of public services in this part of town, acknowledged its inability to access the river borders for cleaning and pick up tasks. However, it confirmed its commitment towards the

project by increasing the number of street containers surrounding the test area, donating street carts, cleaning equipment, clothing, plastic bags and specific training sessions for the *Guardianes*. The local Public Health Care Unit provided preventive assistance and permanent health controls.

A monetary contribution to the *Guardianes* was provided by the Buenos Aires Government Ministry of Environment in the terms of the specific agreement signed in 2005. Fundación Ciudad is responsible for the overall supervision and monitoring of the program.

6.2 Action

With a simple door to door communication campaign the first test of the alternative garbage collection program started in 2006. A rapid and positive response of the neighbors made the program very successful. Cleaner streets, alleys, houses and riverfront were the most visible results. Within the first month of work, residents responded to a satisfaction survey (Fundación Ciudad, 2006):

"Streets are substantially cleaner"; "Guardianes are very helpful"; "There are new jobs in our neighborhood now"; "Maybe they now can clean our river"; "I enjoy walking in cleaner streets"; "I like my neighborhood better now".

Surrounding areas in the villa expected similar service for their blocks and streets. Some neighbors expressed their interest in becoming part of the *Guardianes* team. Raising demand made Fundación Ciudad and the Ministry of Environment extend the number of families served; before the end of that year a total of 16 *Guardianes* was in action, serving an area of around 1000 families, estimated 5000 people.

The *Guardianes* established a daily circuit that included at door to door daily pick up of domestic bags, constant information to the neighbors, daily data recordings, monitoring, weekly meetings, monthly reports to the city government and health controls.

The new service had an immediate impact, with a total of 200.000 domestic bags, some 400 tons, collected in the first 9 months. The number of daily bags increases constantly, even today. In part because neighbors now can rely on a regular collection system that allows them to clean up their own homes and start renewals and improvements they did not consider before.



Figure 5. Riachuelo, towards a new landscape

6.3 The *Players* in the Program

Civil Society: Based on *Metrópolis al Sur* formal presentation of the concept of *Guardianes de los Arroyos*, Fundación Ciudad became in charge of the overall management of the project.

Other actors in the villa include *Nuestra Señora de Caacupé* parish, Community Kitchen *Comedor Amor y Paz*, the Municipal Health Care Unit N° 8.

The Public Sector - City Ministry of Environment – Buenos Aires City Government: An Agreement between City Government and Fundación Ciudad, made possible monthly cash contributions for the Guardianes.

➤ **The Private Sector:** Urbasur, according to the city contracts responsible for garbage collection in this sector of Buenos Aires, reinforces logistics through supply of extra street containers in the borders of the *villa 21-24*, work clothing, equipment (carts, plastic bags), and training sessions.

7 Results

The neighborhood soon became a more livable space for dwellers, showing their willingness to live in a better place.



Figure 6. Towards a new landscape

- A team of workers has learnt to work together and perform a new role linked to regular city services
- In May 2007 the *Guardianes* founded a formal cooperative business under current city laws: *EcoGuardianes21*. This gives them a chance to perform these and other tasks within their community through genuine work.
- The community accepts work carried out by neighbors they actually know
- The private sector partner (the garbage collection company in this case) has acknowledged the success and the results of the project; it is increasing its support and is willing to expand its help.
- Other sections of the slum have expressed their willingness to be included in the program.
- In 2010 the team submitted a proposal to the city authorities to expand its services to the entire 40,000 people slum
- Local authorities have learnt to respect such initiatives and plan to use this model for the rest of the slums in the city
- The 2011 official city garbage collection contracts include this model for slums and hard-to-access neighborhoods.

8 Impacts

Change reached beyond the daily work:

- The *School of Architecture and Landscape and Urban Planning-Universidad de Buenos Aires* (University of Buenos Aires) with the support of private institutions, developed a landscaping proposal for the reforestation of strips of waterfront land with native species, which are now free of garbage and open to the public.
- Donations made this proposal possible and reforestation started a few months after the first actions in the slum.
- The art community also saw an opportunity. A group of artists, muralists with a team of volunteers and private donors led by Janno McLaughlin (Australia), conducted an Art & Community Program in Villa 21-24.
- As a result, green, color and music became part of the *reward* for those areas
- The Provincial Ministry of Environment of Argentina has requested Fundación Ciudad's support to replicate the experience in other critical locations in the Matanza Riachuelo River basin.
- As of 2011, the local government included in its City Services Contracts the *Guardianes del Riachuelo* model as the one to implement in villas and slums throughout the entire city of Buenos Aires
- Fundación Ciudad shares the experience and the results of the project, as a way to inspire others and replicate it in the basin and in the region.
- Corporate Social Responsibility can use this collaborative model as a means to develop new programs through corporate action.
- *Asociación para el Estudio de los Residuos Sólidos (ARS)*, local chapter of international Solid Waste Association (ISWA) together with ISALUD, granted *Guardianes del Riachuelo* an award in November 2006
- *ISWA 07* invited Fundación Ciudad to a public presentation of Guardianes del Riachuelo program at International Congress in Amsterdam

9 Conclusions

Guardianes del Riachuelo program has shown that cities don't just have to coexist with nature. They can be an active part of it. This landscape has become a new and powerful player in the urban scene, no matter how deteriorated or abandoned it might be.

Guardianes del Riachuelo is a program that partially meets the expectations expressed by citizens after years of public conversations and forums about the sustainable use and development of the rich Buenos Aires waterfront.

The *Guardianes* have become active thinkers and proposers of new actions for their community and for the city.

It has been proven that there are various approaches to solving a problem: And it is not only government initiatives that can fulfill these expectations. Civil society can do its part too.

A bottom-up participation process with a successful public-private interaction is an innovative experience in Argentina. It has been well received and is helping to change the approach to tough social and environmental issues.

The development towards a cooperative society represents a huge change of culture that moves away from a permanent dependence on the State, from a subsidy-oriented approach, to thinking about and developing independent actions *together*.

Collaboration that combines both actions and responsibilities and is a continuous ongoing process; not just a product.

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